

# **Hong Kong Xiqu Overview 2020**



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Strategies of Preserving  
Intangible Cultural Heritage :  
Hong Kong Ritual Drama Before and After COVID-19

LUM Man Yee



“Ritual drama” / *shengongxi* has always been a very significant part of Hong Kong Chinese opera. The performance of ritual drama carries special cultural meanings for various local communities in Hong Kong. It also embodies traditions of Chinese opera performance conventions, ritual and social customs. In this essay, Lum Man Yee first succinctly traces the origins and transformations of ritual drama in the larger context of the history of Chinese opera. Consulting primitive

sources as far back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Lum discusses the meanings of the term *shenggongxi*, and examines the current existential conditions of this old tradition in Hong Kong. Based on her fieldwork on ritual drama in 2019 and 2020, Lum scrutinizes the extent the local Chinese opera industry has been debilitated by COVID-19, and how the industry has responded to this incessant pandemic with various tactics of survival, further revealing the specific meanings of *shenggongxi* as “ritual” for local communities.

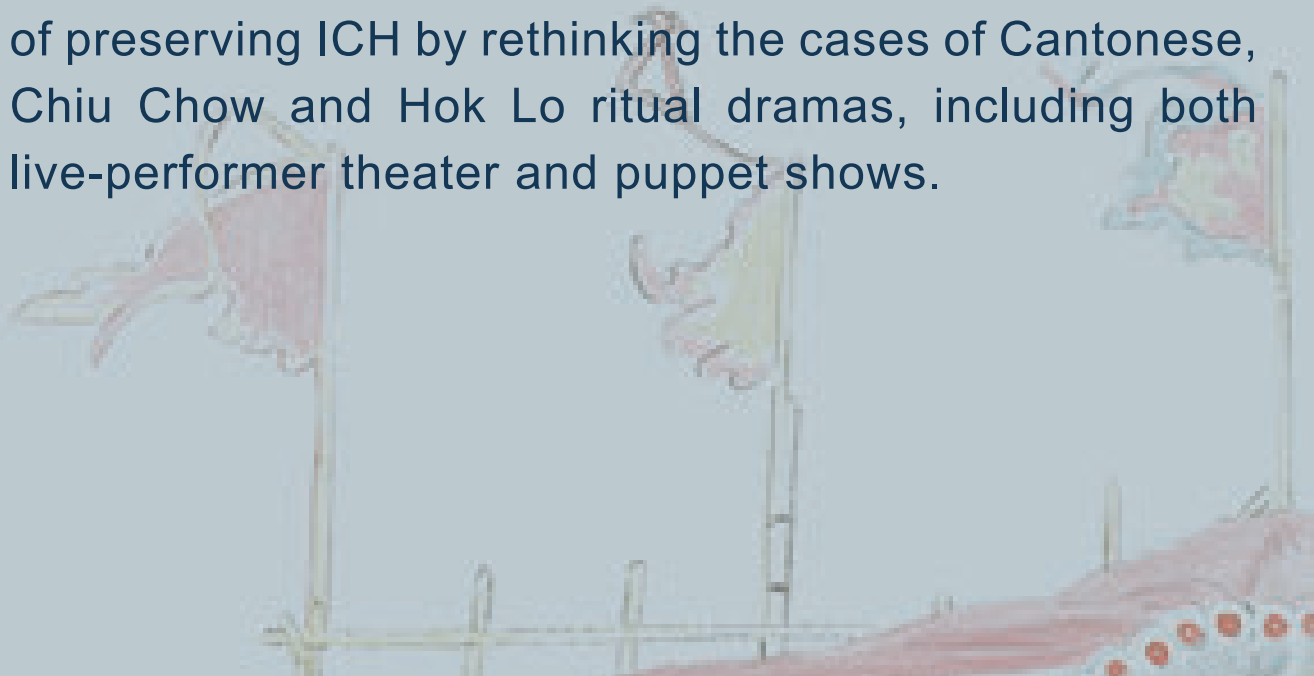
## Preface

*Shenggongxi*—“ritual drama”—a form of theatrical performance closely related to worshipping, clanship, township and community, carries high socio-cultural values. In 2014, ritual drama was included under the sub-category of Cantonese opera<sup>1</sup> on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) initially published by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (the HKSAR Government). In 2009, Cantonese opera was the only item of world-class ICH from Hong Kong inscribed in the *UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Representative List)*, widely believed to be in need of urgent “preservation.”<sup>2</sup>

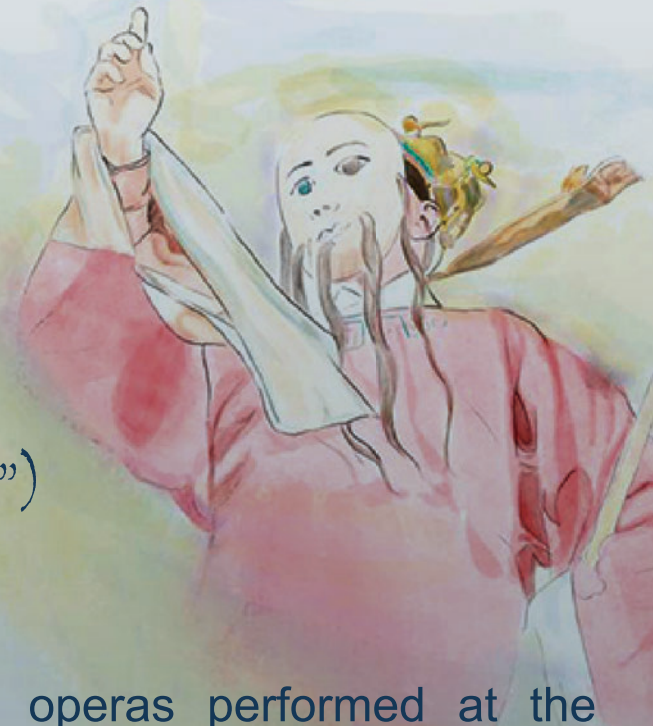
Over the past decade, the HKSAR Government has allocated resources and adopted measures to preserve Cantonese opera. Examples included the establishment of the Cantonese Opera Advisory Committee in 2004 and the Cantonese Opera Development Fund (CODF) in 2005 under the Home Affairs Bureau, as well as the sponsorship of performance, training, promotion, research and publishing. For the sake of encouraging local community organizations to continue using community

resources and funding for staging ritual drama performances, it was clearly stated in the guidelines of the CODF that applications for funding ritual drama performances from the public would not be accepted.<sup>3</sup> While legal bodies under the Home Affairs Bureau such as the Sai Kung District Council, Sha Tin District Council and Chinese Temples Committee have funded ritual drama performances,<sup>4</sup> the Intangible Cultural Heritage Office (ICHO) under the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) has sponsored the research and activities related to the Tin Hau Festival, Cheung Chau *Jiao* Festival, Yu Lan Festival, and others, which are widely celebrated by Cantonese and Chiu Chow communities in Hong Kong.<sup>5</sup>

Government sponsorship is important, but the support from civic groups and Cantonese opera communities has also been playing essential roles in preserving ritual drama. In 2019, various events were held in Hong Kong to mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the inscription of Cantonese opera into the *Representative List* in 2009.<sup>6</sup> Since early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has been spreading all over the world and has tremendously affecting everyday life globally. Its termination is nowhere to be seen yet. Focusing on the two years of 2019 and 2020, the present essay aims at shedding light on the strategies of preserving ICH by rethinking the cases of Cantonese, Chiu Chow and Hok Lo ritual dramas, including both live-performer theater and puppet shows.



# Defining *Shengongxi* ("Ritual Drama")



In Hong Kong, Chinese operas performed at the Cheung Chau *Jiao* Festival, Yu Lan Festival, birthday celebrations of traditional Chinese deities, and consecration ceremonies are all designated under the umbrella term *shengongxi* "ritual dramas" in which *shen* means deities and *gong* refers to *gongde*, meaning contributions and meritorious works. Literatures in the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties (11<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century) recorded official and folk rituals of worshipping virtuous deities, including those employing theatrical performances. Written during his demotion to Yingzhou (now Yingde City in Guangdong Province), Zheng Xia (1041-1119) praised the merits and virtues of the deity Chenghuang in this manner:

Chenghuang safeguards the roundabouts of the particular village, creating blissful lives for the villagers and preventing potential wrongdoers from going astray, bringing tremendous *gongde* [contributions and meritorious works] to the clan. ("Celebrations and Rituals in Yingzhou Chenghuang Temple" in Volume 5, *Anthology of Xitang*.)<sup>7</sup>

The term and notion of "*gongde*" in the above quotation had appeared a thousand years earlier in the chapter of

“Wangzhi” in the ancient text *The Book of Rites* (one of the five Confucian classics): “The ruler who had served well for the people, and demonstrated to them an example of virtue [*gongde*], received an additional territory and rank.”<sup>8</sup> In addition, “Guidelines of Appointment” (Volume 9) in *Collected Statutes of the Ming Dynasty* (completed and published in 1509) edited by Li Dongyang delineated the instructions to newly appointed local officials, also made reference to *gongde*:

Each county government has to organize two rituals, one each in spring and autumn annually at the temples for the deities of the land, mountains, rivers, winds, clouds, rain, thunder, so as to show gratitude to the deities. Various Chenghuang temples and the names of deceased saints and sages who had contributions and meritorious works [*gongde*] done to the people should be included in the lists of deities to be worshipped posthumously. Newly appointed officials must report the details such as the dates and venues of deity worshipping, conditions of altars, instruments of rituals and sacrifices, ensuring the sanity conditions of altars and holding rituals regularly to pay tribute to the divinity.<sup>9</sup>

*History of Fushan County* published in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century also described the birthday celebration of deities in the local Huoxing Temple (Temple of the Fire-Star Goblin) in connection to *shengong* (deities’ contributions and meritorious works):

The 29<sup>th</sup> of the first month was the birthday of Huoxing. There would be four days of ritual drama performances and stages erected for firework display to show gratitude to the deities' contributions and meritorious works [*shengong*].<sup>10</sup>

Theatrical performance, stages of fireworks, incense and candles, fresh fruits as well as flowers were the sacrificial items used to express the loyalty and gratefulness to deities.

Today in Hong Kong, around the bamboo theatre built for ritual drama performance, gigantic flower plaques displaying expressions such as “gratitude to deities for the blessings,” “wishing for fine weather and climate,” “safety and stability for the whole family and clan” are often seen on occasions like the Yu Lan festival, the Cheung Chau *Jiao* festival and birthday celebrations for traditional Chinese deities.<sup>11</sup> Dramas such as *Blessing of Promotion by the God of Fortune* and *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father* carry meanings of prayers and wishes to deities. A series of worshipping activities including theatrical performances arise from the interdependent ideas of “making wishes to deities” and “gratitude to deities for the blessings.” With the research findings from field trips and the analysis of the textual evidence cited above, I suggest that the purpose of *shengongxi* (“ritual dramas”) is to express people’s gratitude to the deities for their blessings, and simultaneously praying to the deities for showing mercy.

In the past 20 years or so, the notion of *shengongxi* (“ritual drama”) understood as “for the deities (we) make contributions and conduct meritorious works” (*weishen*

*zuo gongde*) has been widely spread in studies related to ritual dramas in Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> As discussed above, in various classical sources, the term “*shengong*” means “deities’ contributions and meritorious works.” The assertion that *shengongxi* means “for the deities (we) make contributions and conduct meritorious works” (*weishen zuo gongde*) is conceptually problematic. The term *gongde* is also widely used in Buddhism, meaning the happiness, blissfulness and fortune one receives after doing philanthropic work or behaving well. “The notion of *gongde* could be understood by two concepts, in which *gong* means ‘function’ whereas *de* means ‘good-heartedness’ or ‘virtue.’ Good-heartedness is inborn in one’s soul and mind and has the function of achieving blissfulness and fortune.”<sup>13</sup> (Volume 9, *Mahayana Yoshiaki [Essays on the meaning of Mahayana]*). Thus, chanting scriptures, offering to the Buddha, lecturing on Buddhism and alms giving roughly fall under the category of *gongde*. Likewise, folk rituals such as incense burning, worshipping deities, redeeming wandering spirits from purgatory and even doing good deeds are all deemed as serving the same functions. As such, offering ritual dramas to appease deities could be considered to do *gongde*. Yet, the saying of “the act of offering ritual drama” is equivalent to “for the deities (we) make contributions and conduct meritorious works” is open to discussion. Buddhist monk Master Hsing Yun once said, “*Gongde* is not only beneficial to the accumulation of one’s knowledge in Buddhism, but is also inducive to the cultivation of bliss and happiness for their offspring.”<sup>14</sup> This idea explains why *gongde* is both important for oneself and one’s children.

Similar concepts are seen in Confucianism: “Families that accumulate virtue will be granted abundant happiness” (*Wen Yan: Kun* in *The Book of Changes*).<sup>15</sup> Such thoughts are also rooted in folk cultures: “While one will acquaint with one’s nobles in life with accumulated goodness, treating one’s mother well will help one gain virtue. One is therefore persuaded to benefit mankind and help the poor . . .” (a song in Chapter 5 of *The Story of the Stone*).<sup>16</sup> Gongde could be divided into “*yin*” (private) and “*yang*” (public): the good deeds that are known to the masses are called “*yangde*.” On the contrary, the ones that are unknown to the public or not asking for return are called “*yinde*.” Besides, redeeming wandering spirits from the purgatory by Buddhist monks and Taoist masters is also known as *gongde*, despite the fact that such act is not done for the living but the deceased, taking care of all sentient beings. As for the saying of “for the deities (we) do *gongde*” (*wei shen zuo gongde*),” I could only find it from the works discussing Cantonese ritual drama and other assorted articles, yet the source and origin of such saying has not been seen. Whether worshippers who offer ritual drama performances as sacrifices to deities have ideas of doing *gongde* in their minds is yet to be examined and discussed. If the idea and act of offering ritual drama performances is for showing gratitude to the deities for their contributions and meritorious works, then it goes in line with the concepts revealed in historical literatures, as well as the expressions on the gigantic flower plaques seen at ritual drama performance venues that we still see in Hong Kong. In short, *shengong* in the term *shengongxi* refers to the deities’ contributions and meritorious works.



# Rethinking Hong Kong

## Ritual Drama: Before Covid-19

Ritual dramas in Hong Kong are mainly performed in three worshipping activities: (1) periodically held birthday celebration for deities, (2) Yulan Festivals (also called Zhongyuan Festivals), and (3) Cheung Chau *Jiao* Festivals (normally called “*Dajiao*” by local Hong Kong people). They are also performed occasionally in consecration rituals in the opening ceremonies of newly constructed or renovated temples. Deemed sacrificial items by worshippers, these dramas are offered to show the gratitude for the contributions and virtue of deities, celebrate their birthdays, pacify and bail spirits out of purgatory, pray for social harmony for the mortals and wish for the deities’ continuous patronization. Besides sacrificial purposes, ritual dramas also bring secular and entertaining functions by providing theatrical pleasures to the local and foreign audiences.

Cantonese operas were mostly performed in 2019 for celebrating the birthdays of deities, while Chiu Chow dramas were staged in Yulan festival; and Baizi dramas were mainly performed in Yulan festival and celebration of birthdays of deities, on a half-half ratio by Hok Lo clans coming from areas around Huilai and Hailufeng in Guangdong province. The number of shows was less than those of Cantonese operas and Chiu Chow

dramas. Apart from that, all performances in Cheung Chau *Jiao* festival were Cantonese operas in 2019. Besides the three types of human-actor performances; i.e., Cantonese operas, Chiu Chow dramas and Baizi dramas, “wooden puppet show” from Guangdong province was performed with Cantonese operatic scripts while “iron stick puppet show” from Chiu Chow performed Chiu Chow dramas, both of which illustrated the background and origin of the ritual drama organizing committees. It is worth noting that Cantonese ritual dramas and puppet shows were all performed by local actors and musicians whereas performers of Chiu Chow dramas and Baizi dramas were hired from mainland China, except that the only two “iron stick puppet shows” throughout the year were performed by the only existing local Hong Kong troupe.

At least 38 Cantonese ritual dramas were performed in different districts in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, the New Territories and the outlying islands in 2019. Every show generally included a couple of plays performed in consecutive days (Table 1),<sup>17</sup> among which four performances were ritual dramas shown in different *Jiao* Festivals; i.e., the *Jiao* Festival celebrated once for every decade in Tap Mun, the annual *Jiao* Festival in Cheung Chau, and the *Jiao* Festival in Hing Chun Yeuk, Sha Tau Kok held once almost every decade. A wooden puppet show was initially performed, followed with a performance by human actors. Altogether there were four performances done in *Jiao* Festivals in these three places. Among the 38 shows, one was performed in the memorial ceremony for the ancestors by the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals, the only Cantonese Opera performance, alongside other Chiu Chow dramas and Baizi dramas. Different from most of the ritual dramas

organized by local parties in the names of villages, counties and communities, this performance was held by the famous philanthropic organization with a long history; i.e., the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals. Despite the fact that the altar of ceremony was erected in the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Park in Sai Ying Pun, participants and audiences were not limited to residents of that district and nearby, meaning that including the dramas, the whole ritual activity is inter-territorial. The remaining 33 Cantonese ritual dramas were performed during the birthday celebration ceremony for deities, among which the birthday celebration ceremony of the patron deity Wah Kwong was not organized by local communities but the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (also known as Barwo), a professional organization for Cantonese opera performers in Hong Kong. These performers were employed by different parties and performed ritual dramas for other deities throughout the year, and the birthday celebration ceremony of Wah Kwong was the occasion where they perform for their “guardian deity.” The venue of the birthday celebration was different from those of the majority of ritual dramas. The stage was a permanent indoor arena, but not the temporarily built outdoor stages made of materials such as bamboo and iron pieces. Another noteworthy situation was that out of thirty-three Cantonese operas performed for deities’ birthday celebrations, sixteen shows were held by local organizations to celebrate the birthday of Tin Hau the sea goddess, counting almost half of the overall number of performances throughout the whole year. It reveals the transformation of Hong Kong from a fishing village to a cosmopolitan city and the continuous attempts of fishermen’s offspring to practice the traditions of staging ritual dramas, especially quite

a number of fishermen had already left the fishing industry and landed ashore.

Due to the nature of ritual dramas, plays aiming at expressing gratitude and praying to deities are performed for the sake of expelling the evils and welcoming the bliss. Such plays are called “set pieces (*lixì*)” meaning that they are generally designated and performed according to traditional rules and customs. Aside from that, there is also the “regular repertoire,” which refers to selected plays and could be different for every performance. In Chinese, the pronunciation of the term “regular repertoire (*zhengbenxi*)” denotes plays of “correct script” or “whole script,” whether the former or the latter meaning is accurate is yet to be confirmed. Until now, Cantonese ritual dramas are still performed according to traditional rules and orders. If the venue of performance has never been used for performing purposes, the “set piece” *Sacrificing White Tiger* would be performed to expel the evil goblins. Generally speaking, the opening show would be performed in the evening, starting from the auspicious and festive “set pieces” *Birthday of the God of Venus* and *Prime Minister of Six States*, then followed with other pieces in the regular repertoire. After the first day, two plays would be shown during daytime and evening respectively in the coming several days. When it is the “exact date” of the birthday of deities, set pieces *Bestowing Longevity* (also called *The Eight Immortals Bestowing Longevity*, which is performed to differentiate from *Birthday of the God of Venus* performed in the premiere evening), *Blessing of Promotion by the God of Fortune* and *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father* would be performed. The last show of the last evening would be *Closing the Stage* after the regular repertoire is

performed. The whole ritual drama performance is at this point completed. Thanks to the large number of roles and characters in *Prime Minister of Six States*, adequate costumes and cast are needed. As a result, if any large-scale opera troupe is absent in the show, *Prime Minister of Six States* would be replaced by *Bestowing Longevity, Blessing of Promotion by the God of Fortune* and a small-scale version of *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father*; grand scale version of *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father* performed on the exact (birth)day would be replaced by its small scale one, which requires a smaller size of cast. Such concessionary arrangements were seen in the birthday celebrations of Fook Tak Temple in Sheung Shui Kam Tsin Village and Tin Hau the sea goddess in Cheung Chau and Stanley, as well as *Jiao* Festival in Cheung Chau. For shows of even smaller scale, only set pieces but no regular repertoire would be performed. This year, the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals which organized the birthday celebration ceremony of Tin Hau the sea goddess by employing Tsui Yuet Cantonese Opera Troupe, a small performing body, to perform *Bestowing Longevity, Blessing of Promotion by the God of Fortune* and a small-scale version of *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father* in front of Yau Ma Tei Tin Hau Temple, in order to celebrate the longevity of Tin Hau and pray for bliss and fortune. The show contained no set pieces and only lasted for approximately six minutes in length. Therefore, set pieces are the core plays that demonstrated the essence of ritual dramas in sacrificial occasions.

However, the tradition of set pieces in Cantonese opera is continuously fading. Although some plays that

had not been performed for decades and other relatively complete versions gradually reappeared in different art festivals or large-scale celebratory ceremonies, they were absent in rituals and sacrificial occasions. In November 2019, invited by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (LCSD) of the HKSAR government, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong produced the set piece *The Imperial Emperor of Heaven Holding Court* to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cantonese opera's inscription into the *Representative List* since 2009, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Hong Kong Cultural Centre's grand opening, and the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the People's Republic of China's establishment. Approximately before the 1930's, *The Imperial Emperor of Heaven Holding Court* was still the opening set piece at daytime performance session. The play depicts the arrival of the Imperial Emperor of Heaven and witnessed the evil atmosphere approaching to heaven from the humans' realm, thus ordering the gods to guard the mortal world for the purpose of expelling the evils and disasters, welcoming bliss and fortune. More than thirty years after this play had not been performed, the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong invited a veteran and senior *sheng* (male role-type actor) Jin Shanhe (1865-1964), who was already 93 at the moment, to be the instructor and re-arrange the play and it was performed at the Lee Theatre on 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1959. However, it was never performed again, until after more than thirty years when the organizing committee of the Asian Arts Festival appointed the company Home of Cantonese Opera to re-arrange and perform the show in 1998, before the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The play became popular again at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and was produced by the Chinese Artists

Association of Hong Kong, as the premiere show at the 38<sup>th</sup> Hong Kong Arts Festival and represented Hong Kong to participate in Expo 2010 Shanghai China in the same year. In 2019, the play reappeared in the official public show but was still absent in folk ritual drama schedule.

Basically, the regular repertoire and set piece *Bestowing Longevity* is an indispensable play in ritual drama and is performed in every ritual show. Currently, musical instruments such as gongs and drums, Chinese *dizi* (also named *dida*) are used to perform *paiziqu* (a musical form in Cantonese opera). The actors perform on the stage by doing actions like encircling one hand on the other in front of the chest (gesture of showing courtesy and etiquette) and kneeling to worship, etc., reciting four lines in a poem without singing the tunes. In fact, there existed lyrics and tunes in the original version, yet they were abandoned in circulation for a long time. The tunes and lyrics of the regular repertoire *Bestowing Longevity* could be traced back to *nanxi* (Southern drama) in the Yuan dynasty and the libretto of *kunqu* in Ming and Qing dynasties. The tunes of the Cantonese opera version were kept in musical notations. According to the surveys and interviews conducted at the preliminary stage of research, the senior Cantonese opera performers who have been in the industry for 70 years have never learnt of such information. During 2016-2017, Lingnan University (Hong Kong) carried out a “Knowledge Transfer” project in which academics invited the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong to “realize” the music based on the recorded notations, edited melodies and scripts resulting from academic research. At the premiere show of the Lingnan Arts Festival held in 2017, the “endangered and

disappeared” regular repertoire *Bestowing Longevity* (singing version) reappeared on stage.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, this relatively “complete” version is still not seen in the routine festive and ritual staging of Hong Kong ritual dramas.

While set pieces reveal the tradition of Cantonese opera, the regular repertoire demonstrates its development. The audiences of ritual dramas are mainly local people who are not frequent Cantonese opera goers, that is why the list of ritual dramas could reflect the preferences of ordinary audiences. In the list of the regular repertoire performed in 2019, most of them were Hong Kong Cantonese opera premiered in the 1950-1960’s (see Table 1). Till now, the renowned performing artists and plays in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century are still popular among audiences. On the list of ritual dramas performed in 2019, there were plays written after the millennium, in which the relatively new play *Bandit and Pink Lady* was written by young playwright and actor Keith Lai, who was born in 1980’s. The drama was premiered in the Sha Tin Town Hall by a leading performers Joyce Koi Ming Fai (*sheng*/male role-type) and Ng May Ying (*dan*/female role-type) of the Ming Chee Sing Cantonese Opera Troupe in 2016. Another drama, *To Love Frivolously and Madly* was written by the late playwright Yip Shiu-tak (1930-2009) and premiered in the Sunbeam Theatre. The performance was given by the veteran leading cast Loong Koon-tin (*sheng*) and Emily Chan Wing-yee (*dan*) of Tin Fung Yee Cantonese Opera Troupe in 2004. The two were individually hired by the other opera troupes to perform the same play in the birthday celebration ceremonies for deities in 2019. Despite the fact that new plays were relatively scarce, they showed certain vibrancy

of Cantonese opera since new plays were incorporated in the lists of ritual dramas by the local organizing committee and the new scripts, casts and performance were accepted by local audiences.

In 2019, we saw Cantonese ritual dramas with the participation of Hong Kong local young playwrights and performers, whereas the performers of Chiu Chow dramas and Baizi dramas were mainly invited and employed from mainland China, except that the ritual drama puppet show was performed by Hong Kong Yuk Li Chun Chiu Chow Opera Troupe formed by Chiu Chow descents who have been living in Hong Kong with their roots here for a long time. In 2019, at least nine ritual drama performances were held by Chiu Chow ethnic clans in Yu Lan Festivals and eight of them were “human performances,” including Yu Lan Festival in Tung Tau Village, Tsuen Wan Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival, Kwun Tong Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival, Kowloon City Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival, Shatin Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival, Tsim Sha Tsui (Kwun Chung) Yu Lan Festival, Buddhist Sam Kok Pier Yu Lan Festival, and Cheung Sha Wan Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival.<sup>19</sup> The Yuk Li Chun Troupe was hired by the organizing committee of Sham Tseng Chiu Chow Yu Lan Festival to perform “iron stick puppet show.”<sup>20</sup> In 2019, the Yuk Li Chun Troupe was invited by the organizing committee of Sheung Shui Ku Tung birthday celebration for Guan-yin to perform iron stick puppet show, and the Sun Tin Choi Chiu Chow Opera Troupe was hired by the organizing committee of Hung Hom Sam Yeuk birthday celebration for Master Fook Tak to perform Chiu Chow Opera.<sup>21</sup> The ritual dramas of the Hok Lo clan included those performed in Yu Lan Festivals and birthday celebrations for deities as well. For instance, at the Yu Lan Festival of Fung Tak

Estate and Chuk Yuen Estate in Tsz Wan Shan,<sup>22</sup> the Guangdong Huihailu Meilei Baizi Opera Troupe was invited to perform; in the birthday celebration ceremony for Guanyin in King Lam Estate in Tseung Kwan O,<sup>23</sup> the Shanwei Chengqu Baizi Opera Troupe was hired to do the show; in the birthday celebration ceremony for Grand Master in Yuen Chau Tsai, Tai Po, the Huihailu Hongli Baizi Opera Troupe was invited to perform after a Cantonese opera show.<sup>24</sup> This kind of double-opera-cum-ritual-drama in Yuen Chau Tsai revealed the fact that the large-scale public housing estates nowadays were once the locale where Hok Lo fishermen clustered. It also showed the awakening of self-identity of non-Cantonese clans in the dominant Cantonese culture in Hong Kong.

Chiu Chow operas in Hong Kong were rather thriving in the 1960-1970s. Not only were there opera troupes based in Hong Kong, there were also many local film production companies heading to mainland China for film shooting Chiu Chow opera movies. At the later part of the 1980s, some local Chiu Chow opera troupes invited a certain number of mainland casts and musicians to perform in Hong Kong. In the mid-1990s, most Chiu Chow opera troupes in Hong Kong employed troupes from the mainland to perform, though still in the names of the former local troupes.<sup>25</sup> Hok Lo operas were not as popular as Chiu Chow operas. In the 1960s, there were two local Hok Lo opera troupes, yet one of which was disbanded in 1993 while another one gradually faded out.<sup>26</sup> Despite the fact that there have been no local troupes in recent years, and the Chiu Chow and Hoklo clans in Hong Kong have to hire mainland troupes to perform in Hong Kong, their efforts in preserving the diversity of the ritual drama tradition are indispensable.

The grave condition of endangered local Chiu Chow operas and Hok Lo operas is also worthy of our attention.

The puppet shows that were performed to entertain the spirits and deities in rituals were also in dire situation. Opportunities of public performance dwindled significantly and shrank to a degree that opera troupes almost became extinct. The culprit could be ascribed to the forgotten nature (purposes) of these shows. In 2019, *Jiao* Festival organized once every decade was held in two places; i.e., Tap Mun United Counties and Hing Chun Yeuk in Sha Tau Kok. The former held both puppet shows and Cantonese opera performances, whereas the latter only invited Cantonese opera troupes to perform. The only existing Guangdong puppet troupe in Hong Kong, the Huashan Traditional Puppet Cantonese Opera Troupe performed just one show in 2019. The head of the Lai Chi Wo Village, one of the seven villages in Hing Chun Yeuk, Mr. Tsang Ah Chat at an interview by media said that due to insufficient funding, puppet shows were initially performed in *Jiao* Festivals before 1980's and that the performances were changed to human shows afterwards. In 2019 Mr. Tsang was 81 and it was the eighth *Jiao* Festival he experienced.<sup>27</sup> The main purpose of *Jiao* was to expel the evils and the drama performances were to pacify the wandering spirits in the wilderness, hoping that they could stay away from mortals and stop disturbing them, and simultaneously expressing gratitude to the deities' virtue, contribution and patronization. These shows were related to spirits and therefore had to be performed by using puppets. Choi Chi-cheung who has long been researching on *Jiao* Festival said, "Economic prosperity has caused the secular side of traditional festivals to become grander while the ritualistic part

gradually simplified or cancelled. A good example was that the puppet shows used to entertain spirits and deities in counties and villages were replaced by human performances.<sup>28</sup> Another noteworthy issue is that currently the material of puppets used by the Huashan Traditional Cantonese Opera Troupe has been changed from wood to plastic which is lower in costs. There is still room of discussion about the effects of such transformations on the substance of the rituals, as well as craftsmanship.



The Huashan Traditional Puppet Cantonese Opera Troupe performing at the decennial *Jiao* festival in Shan Ha Tsuen, Yuen Long, 15 January 2021. The troupe has recently adopted plastic puppets instead of the traditional wooden ones. (Photo by courtesy of Lum Man Yee.)

The nature of Chiu Chow iron stick puppet show was also neglected. Xu Duanjie, the third-generation successor of the Lao Yu Chun Xiang Puppet Opera Troupe of Longdu town, Chenghai district, Shantou city said, “The older generation in the past placed high importance on “*zhiying*” (literally papery shadow, meaning Chiu Chow iron stick puppets) and regarded them the authentic drama for deities, “*laoyexi*” (Chiu Chow people call deities as master “*laoye*”). “*Renxi*” (“human performances”) could only be performed after “*zhiying*”

was finished. Troupes of papery shadow would be invited to perform when new temples and ancestral halls were newly constructed. The ritual was called “*Ya Di Ling*” in Chinese, aiming to suppress the evil goblins, bad fortune and vice from the underworld.<sup>29</sup> Mr. Yiu Chi-kit, the president-for-life of the Hong Kong Sham Tseng Chiu Chow Kai Fong Welfare Association, mentioned in a 2018 television show that in the 1940s-1950s, Chiu Chow people used to work and live in beer factories in Sham Tseng and they could barely afford the cost of running a puppet show troupe given their economic status. When they became richer, they called to build large-scale stages for Chiu Chow opera performances. In 2007-2008, the population of Chiu Chow people dropped, leading to an outflow of capital. Puppet show troupes of lower costs were thus hired again to perform.<sup>30</sup> In 2019, puppet shows were also performed in the Yu Lan Festival in Sham Tseng. The decision of whether to do puppet shows or instead human performances hinged on economic conditions, but the ritualistic function of puppet shows was forgotten.

The grand opening of the Xiqu Centre, West Kowloon Cultural District in 2019 was an important event for the Chinese opera communities of Hong Kong. Before the official grand opening on 20<sup>th</sup> January, the management board of the WKCD followed the tradition of the Cantonese opera industry and staged two “open-stage” set pieces *Birthday of the God of Venus* and *Prime Minister of Six States* at the Grand Theatre of the Xiqu Centre on 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2018. In the afternoon of the performance day, rituals of worshipping deities were done at the front stage and the main guests offered incense to the altar accordingly. A “por-toi” ritual (literally

“break the stage” aiming at “cleaning the stage” from evils) called “Sacrificing White Tiger” was conducted with doors of the Grand Theatre closed. The “por-toi” and “hoi-toi” (‘opening’ the stage and make it ready for performance) rituals both carry the meanings of welcoming fortune and expelling evils. Therefore, worshipping deities could be considered a ritual bringing apparent sacrificial meanings. From closing doors and “por-toi,” the ritual of worshipping deities before “opening gongs,” giving free tickets to the public to appreciate the “opening stage” set pieces, to offering free activities one week after “opening stage”—the whole procedures could be seen as a ritual drama spanning from the year 2018 to 2019. From the perspectives of ritual drama traditions, the management team of the WKCD were “outsiders” while the Cantonese opera performers were “insiders.” The list of activities carried out before the official grand opening of the Xiqu Centre epitomized the outsiders’ respect for the beliefs and customs of the insiders. For the outsiders, to respect was a way to protect and safeguard ritual dramas.



Ritual of worshipping deities on the Xiqu Centre’s “Stage Dedication Day,” 30 December 2018. Liza Wang, Chair of the Chinese Artist Association of Hong Kong was praying (second right) while Henry Tang, Chair of the Board of WKCD was about to offer the incense sticks (first right). (Photo by courtesy of Lum Man Yee.)

The Covid-19 pandemic initially emerged at the end of 2019 and proliferated globally. As a result, in 2020, ritual dramas have suffered from an acute drop in the number of performances. The schedule of ritual drama performances in 2019 has become a case example for understanding annual ritual performances prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, and is of particular importance.

## 2020: Rethinking Hong Kong Ritual Drama in the Time of COVID-19

In late December 2019, there were reports of cases of a new coronavirus disease in Wuhan, China. At that time, epidemiologists estimated that the chances of serious outbreak of the virus, soon formally designated COVID-19 by the WHO, in Hong Kong was very slim.<sup>31</sup> Hong Kong ritual drama events were staged as scheduled on 5 and 6 January, 2020. The Fenyang Guo clan of Hong Kong Chiu Chow descent held Chiu Chow opera ritual drama performances for two days at a temporary bamboo theatre (such kind of performance venue is a tradition in ritual drama practices) in Kowloon City.<sup>32</sup> At the end of the day, this event turned out to be the first and only Chiu Chow ritual drama staged in 2020, the first year of the global outbreak of COVID-19.

On 23 January, two people from Wuhan were reported to have been diagnosed with COVID-19 when they arrived in Hong Kong. Suspension of classes at secondary and primary schools was announced by the HKSAR Government in late January. Civil servants were allowed to work from home. On 29 January, the

Leisure and Cultural Services Department announced the temporary closure of cultural amenities, including performance venues. Cantonese opera organizations which had rented indoor performance venues cancelled the scheduled performances as a result. Yet, in February and March, four ritual drama events were still managed to be staged at temporary outdoor bamboo theatres. Meanwhile, Chinese opera troupes that had been contracted for ritual drama performance and with programs confirmed were either cancelled by local community organizers or staged with the scale of performance reduced to the performance of very short versions of ritual drama set pieces that were to be performed inside the temples but not at outdoor bamboo theatres (Table 2).<sup>33</sup>

The first Cantonese ritual drama event in 2020 took place on 4 February for a total of five shows in three consecutive days. The event was sponsored by the Tai Po Ting Kok Village Office to celebrate the Kwan Tai (God of War) Festival and the Chinese Lunar New Year. It was the first ritual drama in the Year of Gengzi in the lunar calendar. The ritual drama for ancestral worshipping held by the Guo's of Chiu Chow descent was held in January 2020, which fell within the lunar Year of Jihai. This first ritual drama performance in 2020 was taken up by the Hung Wan Cantonese Opera Troupe. Anti-pandemic precautions such as measuring the body temperature of audiences and requiring them to wear masks were announced on the Facebook page of the Cantonese opera troupe. The second and third ritual drama shows in 2020 were staged for the celebration of the To Tei (God of Earth) Festival by Tai O's fishermen and land residents, and the Jiao Festival (finale) celebrated by Tap Mun United Counties. The

*Jiao* Festival at Tap Mun is traditionally held only once every 10 years. In 2019, the Tap Mun United Counties held the 22<sup>nd</sup> *Jiao* Festival in which both puppet shows and live action performances were staged. Following the traditional custom, the Chinese opera troupes were employed again in the following year (in this case, it was 2020) to perform for the *Jiao* Festival as the “*jiao* finale.” For these 2020 ritual drama events, the Hung Wan Cantonese Opera Troupe (“hung wan” literally means the best of luck) performed both at the Tai O Fook Tak Temple To Tei Festival and the *Jiao* Festival (finale) of the Tap Mun counties.

The fourth ritual drama event in 2020 was held for the Cheung Chau Pak Tai (Supreme Emperor of the North) Festival performed by the Ko Sing Eagle Cantonese Opera Troupe from 24 to 28 March and it was the last ritual drama event at a bamboo theatre that was able to be pulled off in this first year of COVID-19. Apart from the standard pandemic precautions such as requiring spectators to wear masks, the event organizer, the Cheung Chau Rural Committee additionally emphasized on their Facebook page that because of the pandemic, an “open-style” bamboo theatre was specially built for the occasion. The “open-style” referred to a design of the bamboo theatre without the customary metal plates enclosing the audience seating area so as to maintain good ventilation.<sup>34</sup>

Starting from early February, different clusters of COVID-19 infections began to appear in Hong Kong. The HKSAR Government declared numerous anti-pandemic measures. On 28 and 29 March, the closure of public entertainment amenities and prohibition of social gatherings in public areas (commonly referred to by

local Hong Kong people as “social gathering ban” or “social distancing measures”) were enacted one after another, and the ritual drama performance in bamboo theatre was therefore under severe restriction. The ritual drama event at the Cheung Chau Pak Tai Festival ended on 28<sup>th</sup> March, just before the implementation of the ban on all public shows. A video clip uploaded on the Facebook page recording the performance under anti-pandemic restrictive measures showed that the basketball court in which the bamboo theatre was located was encircled by iron fences, and audience seats were removed. Some of the musicians performed not at the two sides of the stage but below the stage. The musicians were divided and separated into small groups. At curtain call, audiences gathered together outside the iron fences to give their applauses to the performers.<sup>35</sup> The Cheung Chau ritual drama event which lasted a total of five days thus came to a full end in the midst of the strict enforcement of the new “Cap. 599 Prevention and Control of Disease Ordinance.”

The social gathering ban had been continuously effective in different degrees during 2020. The performance to celebrate the Pak Tai Festival in Cheung Chau ended up the last ritual drama show staging at the bamboo theatre. But the bamboo theatre is not the only possible performance space for ritual drama. After April, there were still organizations of deity worshipping commissioning Cantonese ritual drama. One scenario that could cope with the pandemic restrictions was that for those shows that had already been confirmed with dates of performances, and contracts signed with the troupes and actors and musicians, they would not be performed at a bamboo theatre. Instead, short versions of ritual drama set

pieces of *Bestowing Longevity*, *The God of Fortune*, *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father (Mini Scale Version)* lasting few minutes were performed “on the ground” in front of or inside the temple. Insiders call such an arrangement of performance “off-to-ground” (off-stage, “*luodi*”) dramas, in contrast to the ones performed on stage. “Off-to-ground” performance was adopted for a couple of occasions in 2020: The Cha Kwo Ling Residents Association planned to perform dramas for five days to celebrate the Tin Hau Festival in April.<sup>36</sup> Yuen Chau Tsai’s Tai Wong Yeh Temple Committee planned to perform dramas for the Tai Wong Yeh (Grand Master) Festival for eight days in June.<sup>37</sup> The Village Affairs Committee of Fanling Wai had plans about performing for the *Jiao* Festival for six days in December.<sup>38</sup> These events were all conducted in “off-to-ground” set pieces. To perform “off-to-ground” set pieces in front of or inside the temple was not a new practice. Academic studies in the 1990s showed that Cantonese Opera troupes had been hired to perform “off-to-ground” set pieces by the organizing committee of Ping Chau Tin Hau Festival, *Jiao* Festival in Central Street, Western district, Fook Tak Temple To Tei Festival, and Lords of the Three Mountains Festival in Kowloon Ping Shek Estate.<sup>39</sup> In the time of COVID-19, useful, alternative traditional performance practices were constructively employed to cope with the government’s public gathering restrictions.

In ritual drama settings, audience seats are normally inside the bamboo theatre but not inside or in front of the temple facing the bamboo theatre. Some people do stop by as spectators standing outside the bamboo theatre to watch the shows. Actually, “audiences” of ritual dramas are not just there watching the performances,

but also believers, participants of worshipping, organizing committee members and the clans involved, or members of the community. Anthropologist Barbara Ward asserted that the performers of ritual drama were not only actors, but also the medium of communication between humans and gods/deities.<sup>40</sup> By the same token, the audiences of ritual dramas also carry multiple identities no matter whether they are watching inside or in front of the temple, or taking the audience seats in the bamboo theatre.

Under the social gathering ban, there was yet another form of practicing ritual drama carried out in Hong Kong. It was, before the beginning of a Cantonese opera troupe's commercial shows at a theatre, the performance of (again) the short versions of the set pieces of *Bestowing Longevity*, *The God of Fortune*, and *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father (Mini Scale Version)* right in front of the spirit tablets or small statues of the deities put on a regular altar set in the backstage of the performance venue. Such a ritualistic performance is to express the gratitude to and to pray for the patronage of deity Wah Kwong the Grand Master, the guardian deity of the Cantonese opera industry.

The performance venues under the management of the LCSD reopened several months after the temporary closure at the beginning of 2020. Various art groups gradually resumed on-site performances in June, with the gradual reopening of public venues. At the beginning of the resumption, only the performers were allowed on stage but audiences were not admitted in the theatres. Online broadcasts of live performances were attempted by the troupes and it was first done by the Kim Lun Cantonese Opera Troupe. Later, from 19

June, audiences were accepted again in performance venues. This time around, the Sensational Sprouts Cantonese Opera Association was the first troupe to do live Cantonese opera performance with live audience. A few days later, the Hong Kong Xiqu Troupe also held public Cantonese opera performances. All these three opera troupes performed the ritual drama set pieces in front of the guardian deity Wah Kwong the Grand Master before the beginning of their shows at the backstage. This is a custom of the Cantonese opera industry. This practice, as mentioned above, was not a novelty that popped up in the midst of pandemic restrictions. On the contrary, it is part of the ritual drama tradition. The practice was not an “invention” as a measure responding to the pandemic.

There have been various forms of Cantonese ritual drama performance in different social contexts, and they differ in scales, performance procedures, venues, time. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, different adaptive strategies depending on financial conditions, manpower, venues and time would be adopted by the worshipping communities. Different forms of performances exist in the traditional worshipping customs. In times of pandemic, regardless of the worshipping communities’ resources, they faced the same situation and challenge. Limiting the ritual event to the performance of the three short set pieces had therefore become the popular option for keeping the function of ritual drama’s expressing the gratitude and prayer for the patronage from deities in the time of COVID-19. It showed that the strategies for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage had to take different forms of ritual drama presentation into consideration for sustaining the cultural tradition.

In the past, the Yu Lan Festival was celebrated by the Chiu Chow, Hok Lo, Guangdong communities and ritual drama events were organized in many districts in Hong Kong in the Lunar calendar month of July. Due to the pandemic and the various restrictive precautionary measures, no Yu Lan ritual drama performances in bamboo theatre took place in 2020. The Chiu Chow and Hok Lo communities lay heavy emphasis on the importance of the Yu Lan Festival, and for more than twenty years performers from mainland China had been hired to come to Hong Kong to perform the Chiu Chow and Hok Lo operas of their hometowns. Non-local residents were restricted from crossing the borders between the mainland and Hong Kong since March 2020 by the HKSAR Government's anti-COVID-19 policies. Performers of Chiu Chow and Hok Lo regional operas in mainland China were unable to come to Hong Kong to stage ritual drama. The pandemic thus once again alerted us that local Hong Kong Chiu-chow and Hok Lo opera troupes do have an indispensable role in maintaining and preserving the diversity of regional opera genres in the realm of Hong Kong ritual drama.

Although the social gathering ban ordinance was continuously put in effect by the government, toward the end of 2020 there was a large-scale ritual drama performance in which over seventy performers participated. It was the annual event organized by the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong (Barwo) to celebrate the birthday of the guardian deity Wah Kwong. Throughout 2020, public performance venues were suspended three times by the government. The Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong coincidentally seized the opportunity to hold a ritual drama event in the time gap between 1 October to 10 December, when

the venues were reopened and audiences allowed (after the second closure from the middle of the year). The Association staged the ritual drama event at the Ko Shan Theatre. After that, venues in Hong Kong were shut down again for the third time. Following the custom, the Association's ritual drama performance began at 11pm on 12 November at its own site, with the customary set pieces of *Bestowing Longevity*, *The God of Fortune*, *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son to the Mortal Father (Mini Scale Version)* performed in front of the deity altar. The next day the two set pieces *Grand Birthday Celebration at Mount Heung Fa* and *The Heavenly Maiden Delivers Her Son (Grand Scale Version)* were staged in the afternoon at the theatre. The show lasted for approximately two hours.<sup>41</sup>

*Grand Birthday Celebration* depicts the spectacle of the fairy-celestial realm: The immortals enter stage to tell their backgrounds, perform stylized body movements and gestures, and then proceed to the purple bamboo grove to celebrate the birthday of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva. The climax of the piece is the sequence of the "18-metamorphoses of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva" played by the female protagonist through changing the costumes and appearances, signifying the sacred power of bodily transformation. The closing scene begins with Cao Baoxian throws away prop money coins to the audiences. Normally, actors on stage will toss many rounds of the fake ancient coins to the audience, symbolizing wealth and fortune. There are always audience members rushing toward the stage to pick up the coins whereas some would be indifferent, creating an interesting scene in the auditorium. The boundary between audiences/watching and performers/playing is blurred. No matter whether the spectators would pick up the prop coins or not, they either actively or passively

“play” the role of the crowds in the ritual drama who are supposed to conduct one’s own good deeds in life. The spectators participate as players in the drama and become part of it, obtaining an immersive experience.

The staging of *Grand Birthday Celebration* in COVID-haunted 2020 was adjusted in compliance with the social distancing requirements. The master of ceremony before the commencement of the ritual performance announced that prop coins would only be tossed within the boundary of the stage and would not be tossed beyond the stage to the audience. Instead, the prop coins would be distributed to the audience at the foyer outside the auditorium after the performance was finished. However, at the end of the performance, there were still some spectators coming close to the stage to see if there were chances to get some coins. Accidentally some coins were thrown over the stage, and some spectators rushed forward to grab them. When the show came to an end, some members in the audience lowered their heads and searched for the last opportunities for the coins. Although the audience was not as excited as those at last year’s show, the scene of Cao Baoxian tossing coins to the stage in this “restricted” 2020 performance still resulted in a portrait of daily life revealing ordinary people’s non-stoppable desire for good fortunes symbolized by the prop money, regardless of the fact that the chance of getting the coins this time around was small.

Regarding the playscript of *Grand Birthday Celebration*, there is a significant difference between the current version and the older. In the playscript inherited from Cantonese opera artists of the older generation, there was a canto of lyrics about Guanshiyin Bodhisattva’s didactic teaching

to the mortals extracted from *The Didactic Play of Maudgalyāyaa's Deliverance of His Mother* compiled and published by Zheng Zhizhen (1516-1595) in the Ming Dynasty. The lyrics were placed in *Grand Birthday Celebration* after the scene of Cao Baoxian tossing coins, lamenting that mortals suffered from the utmost agony and torment in pursuit of fame and fortune. The mortals were therefore persuaded to chant the sutra and practice Buddhism so that they could escape from the cycle of reincarnation and trouble.<sup>42</sup> In "The Universal Door of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva" from The Wonderful Dharma Lotus Flower Sutra, it is said that Guanshiyin Bodhisattva will appear in the relevant form of mortals, when any of the sentient beings from the lands of the ten quarters request for Guanshiyin Bodhisattva's enlightenment and salvation. From the "18-metamorphoses" to "didactic teaching," the presence of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva illustrates the cultural essence of the ritual drama set piece *Grand Birthday Celebration* at Mount Heung Fa in the traditional repertoire of Cantonese opera.<sup>43</sup>

Today, this scene of Guanshiyin Bodhisattva's didactic teaching is not seen in the Cantonese opera performance for the birthday celebration of deities. In recent years, the scene only once reappeared in a performance for the celebration for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hong Kong's return to mainland China. The show was one program in the city's Chinese Opera Festival 2017 and was presented in July as part of the handover celebration ceremony.<sup>44</sup> At the ritual performance of the Wah Kwong Festival later in the same year, the scene was again absent.<sup>45</sup> After the deletion of this scene, what remained were the acrobatic skills in a series of flamboyant scenes. When it comes to the question of

the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, this case deserves much serious thought.

## Conclusion

Since the HKSAR Government's declaration of the Places of Public Entertainment Ordinance and its implementation of social distancing measures in March 2020, to perform Cantonese opera ritual drama in bamboo theatre would become a violation of law. The lively spectacle of gongs and drums in every Tin Hau Festival and Yu Lan Festival in the past disappeared. About a year has passed and the stakeholders voiced their opinions accordingly.

On 10 March, 2021, Cantonese opera performers, opera troupe leaders, rural committees and the representatives of village offices called for a forum featuring the theme of "Saving Ritual Drama." Ten key points were concluded after the talk. The first issue was the livelihoods of ritual opera practitioners: "Every year, more than thirty percent of the total performances done by professional Cantonese opera troupes were ritual dramas. Only three shows were performed in the beginning of last year (2020). For ritual dramas alone, more than twenty-five million dollars of deficit in business were recorded. No prospects of any shows this year (2021) means that the loss suffered by the troupes will be beyond estimation. The livelihoods of practitioners are thus under heavy blows. Furthermore, the reopening of theatres would be of no use to ritual drama performances, especially for the professional

practitioners specializing in bamboo theatres performances and workers in the bamboo scaffolding industries. In other words, they are continuously suffering from unemployment.”<sup>46</sup>

A week after the forum on saving ritual drama, the chairperson of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong drafted an open letter to the Chief Executive of the HKSAR, entitled “Rescue World-Class Intangible Cultural Heritage: Save Traditional Cantonese opera (San Gung Hei) from the Crisis of Interruption,” listing the information that the association had gathered regarding the problems facing the industry. The first point was also about the livelihoods of ritual drama practitioners: “25 out of the 34 ‘ritual drama’ shows which have originally been planned for 2020 to 2022 have been confirmed cancelled. About 2,000 jobs are involved and the loss in income is close to 12 million dollars.”<sup>47</sup>

The relationship between the existence and continuity of Cantonese ritual drama and the livelihoods of Cantonese opera practitioners is very much intertwined, symbolizing the tenacious vitality of this intangible cultural heritage.

On 1 April 2021, the Home Affairs Bureau notified the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong that if the organizers of ritual drama and all participants would observe the latest regulations set in the Places of Public Entertainment Ordinance, performances would be allowed in bamboo theatres.<sup>48</sup> In May, ritual drama performances for the *Jiao* Festival in Cheung Chau were resumed. Yung Chi-ming, the chairperson of the organizing committee of the Cheung Chau Jiao Festival stated that only one hundred people were permitted in

the bamboo theatre. Citizens had to scan the QR code of the “Leave Home Safe” app on their mobile phones before entering the bamboo theatre.<sup>49</sup> To control people’s going in and out, the bamboo theatre was surrounded by iron fences.

In the second half of 2021, only a small number of ritual drama performances in bamboo theatre was recorded. After the *Jiao* Festival, the relatively large-scale one was the Tai O Po Chu Tam Hau Wong (Marquis Prince) Festival. Sik Sik Yuen held a centennial anniversary celebration in September and the Taoist master Lee Yiu-fai (Yee-kok), who was the abbot of the Wong Tai Sin Temple, said that due to the unsuccessful application for constructing the bamboo theatre and sacred altar-shrine outside the Wong Tai Sin Temple, they decided to move the performance venue to the Xiqu Centre, the West Kowloon Cultural District.<sup>50</sup> As a considerable of time in advance is necessary for organizing ritual drama events, resuming bamboo theatre ritual drama events to the normal is yet to be seen.

COVID-19 is a collective challenge faced by the world. Everybody is trying to live a normal daily life in the new normal. Cantonese opera ritual drama has a long tradition and it has experienced various challenges in its history and made large and small adjustments for survival over time. There have always been people making attempts to safeguard the cultural heritage of ritual drama across generations. Sustainability within transformation will be possible should the core spirit of tradition is maintained.

*English Translation: Carmen Kong*



The pandemic in Hong Kong became less severe in June 2020. Performance venues were allowed to admit audiences again from 19 June. The Sensational Sprouts Cantonese Opera Association performed ritual drama set pieces backstage in front of the altar for the guardian deity Wah Kwong before they began the evening's show at the Ko Shan Theatre. Amongst the set pieces was *Bestowing Longevity*. (Photo by courtesy of Man Wah [troupe leader, scriptwriter, and lead actor in civil-cum-military role-type, Sensational Sprouts Cantonese Opera Association].)



In March 2020, the ritual drama performance for the Pak Tai Festival in Cheung Chau was completed upon the commencement of the anti-pandemic restrictions. In May, the *Jiao* Festival ritual drama show was cancelled. It was resumed in 2021. The bamboo theatre was surrounded by iron fences set up by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department. Audiences were required to scan the Leave Home Safe app QR code prior to entering the bamboo theatre. (Photo by courtesy of Chloe Chan, the female lead in the named ritual drama performances.)

# Notes

- 1 Other Cantonese opera sub-categories include “Singing of Cantonese Opera Excerpts,” “Cantonese Opera Music,” “Cantonese Opera Vocal,” “Episodic Acts of Cantonese Opera.” Intangible Cultural Heritage Office: accessed 12 February 2022. (English) [read more>>](#) , (Chinese) [read more>>](#)
- 2 In the UNESCO’s *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), the notion “safeguarding” refers to the measures adopted to ensure the vitality of intangible cultural heritage, including the confirmation of status, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion and inheritance (mainly through official and non-official education) and reinvigoration. See “What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?”, Intangible Cultural Heritage Office, Hong Kong: accessed 12 June 2021. (English) [read more>>](#) , (Chinese) [read more>>](#)
- 3 Application Guidelines, Cantonese Opera Development Fund: accessed 12 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 4 “Reports of Working Groups Established Under FAC: Working Group on Arts and Cultural Activities”: poster of the *Jiao* Festival in Hau Wong Temple [read more>>](#), Tai Wai Village, Shatin, 2017: accessed 12 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 5 “Funded Projects of Community-driven Projects 2020,” Intangible Cultural Heritage Office: accessed 12 February 2022. (English) [read more>>](#) , (Chinese) [read more>>](#)
- 6 Document CB(2)1029/18-19(04), pp. 4-8 (on the promotion activities for celebrating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary for Cantonese opera being inscribed on the *UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*), Panel on Home Affairs, Legislative Council, HKSAR Government: accessed 12 June 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 7 Zheng Xia, “Celebrations and Rituals in Yingzhou Chenghuang Temple,” *Poem Anthology of Xitang*, Volume 5, collected in Book 1117, *Complete Library of the Four Treasuries (Siku Quanshu)*, Shanghai: Shanghai Chinese Classics Publishing House, 1987, p. 421.
- 8 “Royal Regulations; Proceedings of Government in Different Months,” *The Book of Rites*, edited by Li Xueqin, Taipei: Taiwan Classics Publishing, 2001, p. 426.
- 9 “Guidelines of Appointment,” *The Code of Great Ming Dynasty*, Volume 9, edited by Li Dongyang, et al (Ming Dynasty), Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1989, p. 53.

- 10 *Collection of Annals of Local History in China: A Compilation of Shanxi County Local History*, Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2005: Volume 55 “Annals of Local History of Fushan County” (photocopy, 1847 edition), p. 195; Volume 55 “Annals of Local History of Fushan County” (photocopy, 1880 edition), p. 515; Volume 56 “Annals of Local History of Fushan County” (photocopy, 1935 edition), p. 227.
- 11 “Chinese Cultural Channel: Bamboo Craft, Flower Plaque Showcase,” Radio and Television of Hong Kong (RTHK): accessed 12 June, 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 12 This explication of “*shenggong xi*” was seen as early as the 1990s in Chan Sau Yan’s *Ritual Drama in Hong Kong: Cantonese opera, Chiu Chow opera and Hoklo opera* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1996): “‘*Shenggong*’ means doing ‘*gongde*’ for deities. It does not necessarily mean drama performance only. It does not just take place at festivals, birthday celebrations for deities or *Jiao* festivals, either. Activities like burning incense to worship deities and construct or restore altars or temples in ordinary days all fall under the category of ‘*shenggong*.’ When a community organizes Chinese opera performances to celebrate deities’ birthdays for the deities or on occasions like *Jiao* Festivals, for the purpose of ‘entertaining deities and humans’ and to ensure that ‘deities and humans are happy together.’ In these circumstances, all the Chinese opera performances are then ‘*shenggong xi*’ [ritual drama]” (p.12). In another recent book coauthored by Chan and Estella Cham Lai Suk Ching entitled *The Ups and Downs of Ritualistic Cantonese Opera* (Hong Kong: Chung Hwa Book Company, 2018), the same explication is reiterated: “Doing ‘*gongde*’ for deities [*sheng*] is called ‘*shenggong*’ in short form. ‘*Shenggong*’ is not necessarily done at festivals, birthday celebrations for deities or during *Jiao* Festivals. The more commonly seen *shenggong* are in activities like worshipping deities, burning incense and donating money for buying sacrificial items. In Hong Kong, *shenggong* activities in the contexts of local communities in larger scales include: birthday celebrations for deities, *Jiao* Festival, Yu Lan Festival (i.e., Zhongyuan Festival or Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival), expressing gratitude to deities, consecration ceremonies and traditional festivals” (p.10). In *The Culture of Hong Kong Bamboo Theatre* (Hong Kong: Infolink Publishing, 2019), Choi Kai Kwong directly adopts this explication, writing that “‘*Shenggong*’ means doing ‘*gongde*’ for deities, thus ‘*shenggong xi*’ refers to the Chinese opera performance for ‘doing *gongde* for deities’ (p.34). Luo Li in her study “Discussing Cantonese Ritual Drama” published in the Guangzhou journal *Nanguo Hongdou* (*Red Bean in Southern State*) (Volume 4, 2006) elaborates that “the titles and content of the plays staged in ritual drama performances are not necessarily

related to various kinds of deities. The plots can also be multifarious. *Gong* means *gongde* [achievements and merits]. *Shengong* are the deities' achievements and merits. It also carries the meaning of doing *gongde* for the deities. Performing ritual drama is in fact asking the deities for their blessings or to express gratitude to the deities for their blessings bestowed (p.53). In *Moving Shadows on Red Carpets: Inter-reflections on Literature, Chinese Opera, and Film* (Taipei: Independent and Unique Publishing, 2021), Shen Hui-ju expresses the same ideas regarding “*shenggong xi*” as Luo’s (p. 119).

- 13 “*Gongde*,” *Grand Dictionary of Buddhist Thoughts*, edited by Wu Ju-chun, Taipei: Commercial Press, 1994, p. 202.
- 14 Online version, Complete Works of Venerable Master Hsing Yun: accessed 12 June, 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 15 *Annotations on Changes of Zhou: Shangjing (Hexagrams 1-30)*, edited by Li Hsueh-chin, Taipei: Taiwan Classics Publishing, 2001, p.36.
- 16 Cao Xueqin and Gao E, *The Story of the Stone: Version A of Cheng Weiyuan*, Beijing: Beijing Library Press, 2001, p.205.
- 17 The performance schedule of Cantonese ritual drama events is gleaned from the posters uploaded on Facebook by related troupes and actors.
- 18 This “Knowledge Transfer Project” was led by Lum Man-yee, funded by the Knowledge Transfer Programme of the Office of Research and Knowledge Transfer (ORKT) and the Faculty of Arts, Lingnan University. Lee Kei-fung and Yuen Siu-fai were the art directors for the performances, Ko Yun-kuen and Ko Yun-hung music and percussion leaders. The casts included actors from the Cantonese Opera Young Talent Showcase of the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong, and the Training Course for Young Cantonese Opera Performers of the Association’s Cantonese Opera Academy. Details see the opening event souvenir book (2 March 2017), *Lingnan Arts Festival 2017*, presented by the Arts Faculty and co-organized by the Kwan Fong Cultural Research and Development Programme, Lingnan University, and the Chinese Artists Association of Hong Kong.
- 19 Information Brochure of the Hong Kong Tourism Board: accessed 20 July 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 20 See the Facebook post created on 25 August, 2019 by the Hong Kong Yuk Li Chun Chiu-chow Opera Troupe.
- 21 See the Facebook posts of the Hong Kong Teochew Culture Club, 27 April 2019, and those of the Hong Kong Yuk Li Chun Chiu-chow Opera Troupe, 27-28 March 2019.

- 22 Video uploaded by Mavis Lau: accessed 20 July 2021. [read more>>](#)
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 See the poster uploaded on the Facebook page of Choi Kai Kwong, 10 June 2019.
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- 35 Curtain call video see the Facebook page “Wing Lun Art Snapshots,” 29 March 2020.
- 36 See the video clip “Hong Kong Traditional Festival”: accessed 30 November 2021. [read more>>](#)
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